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## MEDIA RELEASE

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### End the blame game

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NSW Irrigators' Council cautiously welcomed the release of the final *Report of Independent Panel into fish deaths in the Lower Darling* and said it should bring about an end to the blame game.

"The report confirms that there were multiple reasons these fish deaths occurred, but compliance breaches were not one of them," said CEO of the NSW Irrigators' Council Luke Simpkins.

"Irrigation farmers upstream of Menindee have not had access to water for over 12 months, and the Natural Resources Access Regulator has not found evidence of wide-scale compliance issues and that is consistent with the findings of this Report."

"What the report did find was that the system this year received less than one percent of typical flows showing the water was not taken from the system as it simply wasn't there for anyone – not farmers, not the environment, and at times, not even communities – and that is distressing for all."

"As an industry, we agree with some of the findings of this report outlining how we can all work together towards improving river health and water security so we can better manage the system in unprecedented dry periods," Mr Simpkins said.

NSWIC acknowledged the rapid adoption of some key recommendations by Water Minister, David Littleproud but warned him not to use the report as an excuse to return to non-strategic buybacks.

"It is great to see the Government commit to investing in ways to improve river habitats and do further research and development," Mr Simpkins said.

"Irrigation farmers also strongly welcome investments in compliance and transparency measures such as meters and river cameras, which are crucial in educating the broader public about the reality of our highly variable rainfall and river systems," he said.

“But we do hold concerns about the impacts on the Bourke community given intentions to secure A class licences in the Barwon-Darling.

“We have seen the impact of water buyback on communities across the Basin and Bourke has already been one of the hardest hit with the closure of Toorale Station.”

Spokesperson for the Barwon-Darling, Ian Cole, said “It means we will never see the horticulture industry revived after it was crippled by the Millennium Drought, and now this crippling drought. This will really hurt our close-knit community at Bourke.”

He said local farmers are particularly concerned about misunderstanding surrounding the causes of water insecurity in the regions, given the report found average flows in all major irrigation valleys are only about 3-15% less presently than under pre-development (irrigation) conditions.<sup>1</sup>

The panel also found that, water extractions from the tributaries a much greater impact on Menindee inflows than extractions directly from the Barwon-Darling River.<sup>2</sup>

“Even when we do have access to water, due to the rules (which we respect), 94% of flows in the Barwon-Darling are reserved for the environment and only 6% is available for irrigation farmers,” Mr Cole said.

The buyback of A class licences was not a recommendation of the Vertessy Report.

NSWIC acknowledges the recognition in the report of the great extent of work already underway, in partnership with irrigation farmers, to best manage our river systems.

For further information:

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Approved JC/TN

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<sup>1</sup> R. Vertessy, D. Barma, L. Baumgartner, N. Bond, S. Mitrovic, F. Sheldon, (2019) *Independent Assessment of the 2018–19 fish deaths in the lower Darling – Final Report* [p.17].

<sup>2</sup> R. Vertessy, D. Barma, L. Baumgartner, N. Bond, S. Mitrovic, F. Sheldon, (2019) *Independent Assessment of the 2018–19 fish deaths in the lower Darling – Final Report* [p.12].